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1 *Daniel Schorr*

A Whiff of Watergate?

Hell hath no fury like a Congress scorned. The Democratic-controlled Congress, scenting abuse of power in Nicaragua and Iran, is going into its war dance, and the wagons of executive privilege are being drawn around the Reagan White House.

If you think you smell a whiff of Watergate in the air, it's because the odor is there. There is no evidence of illegality in congressional mandates evaded and executive orders flouted. But once again, the issue is raised of a willful president, scornful of the plodding ways of democratic government, pursuing his perceived national security objectives by extralegal means.

In the present case, President Reagan had a pocket clandestine directorate created inside the staff of the National Security Council. This was not the NSC operated as a collegial body of Cabinet officers and intelligence professionals, coordinating policy and advising the president. It was simply a roosting place, under a blanket of executive privilege, for compartmented special projects.

From this vantage point, Robert McFarlane's protégé, Marine Maj. (later lieutenant colonel) Oliver North, a Vietnam veteran in unconventional warfare, rode herd on the CIA's mining of Nicaragua's harbors. When Congress imposed a cease-fire on hostile official activity against the Sandinista regime, North simply created a network of military friends from Vietnam days to do the job of supplying the contras.

A America's anticommunist ventures have left a pool of unrequited right-wingers available for such work. The Nixon "plumbers" did their recruiting mainly among embittered veterans of the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion—Howard Hunt, a CIA alumnus, and his crew of Cuban-Americans. Aid to the contras drew on some anti-Castro talent along with retired military officers with counterinsurgency skills, and grudges, dating back to Vietnam. They included two retired major-generals—John Singlaub, Army, and Richard Secord, Air Force.

North maintained formal deniability for the White House about the CIA-like chartering of planes and dropping of supplies. But when one cargo plane was shot down in Nicaragua a month ago, it was traced back to an airfield near San Salvador. Telephone records there showed calls to Secord and to the White House line of Oliver North.

Arms to Iran in return for American hostages held by Iran's terrorist friends in Lebanon fell into place as another assignment for a tested covert action facility. Its origin was Reagan's chagrin over the political fallout of the public pressures by hostages' families for government action.

When covert action substitutes for foreign policy, little consideration is given to countervailing arguments about departing from declared

positions against giving aid to terrorists and against taking sides in the Iran-Iraq war. It appears that the principal concern was to withhold details from the State and Defense departments, which might press such arguments.

Secret missions have a way of taking on a life of their own, involving a concentration on keeping the secret at the expense of examining the rationale for what is being kept secret. So well were the secrets kept from most of the executive branch, not to mention Congress, that Israeli diplomatic and intelligence officials, partners in the enterprise, knew more about what the U.S. government was doing than all but a few in that government.

When McFarlane left the White House last December, North officially took over the "Iranian connection," but when North flew to Tehran, he took along McFarlane—another "volunteer" from the private sector.

Now congressional committees are preparing to ask for NSC files and telephone logs, seeking to establish how pocket government works and how it subcontracts to the "private sector." The White House indicates it will invoke executive privilege. To paraphrase Ronald Reagan in other connections, here we go again.

The writer is senior news analyst for National Public Radio.